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The making of the Danish liberal drinking style: the construction of a "wet" alcohol discourse in Denmark

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There is a liberal attitude toward alcohol consumption in Denmark and the country experiences few problems with alcohol abuse. The national drinking pattern is one of frequent but temperate consumption of alcoholic beverages, mostly beer. The majority of consumption takes place in the home; initial drinking by adolescents is usually done in the presence of adults; and there is little increase in the rhythm of drinking on weekends or holidays. Alcoholic beverages, including distilled spirits, are sold in virtually all retail food outlets. There has been little variation in these patterns for years¹

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The Danish conscious drinking style

As illustrated by the above quotation from *The Encyclopedia of Alcoholism*, Denmark is known as a “wet” but pleasant and manageable society with regard to alcohol. It has often been idealized as the society where it has proved possible to control alcohol consumption without restrictions, whereas Sweden and the other Scandinavian countries, also according to the encyclopedia, have bigger alcohol problems, mostly caused by a consumption of spirits very much concentrated on the weekends. The other Scandinavian countries are also much more concerned with problems relating to their alcohol consumption; this can be seen in their restrictive policies characterized by an alcohol monopoly and in the importance attached to alcohol care and alcohol research.

The differences sketched in policy and attitudes toward alcohol and in the level of alcohol problems may seem paradoxical, given that the other Scandinavians drink much less than the Danes—in 1984, annual per capita consumption was 3.3 liters of 100% alcohol in Iceland, 3.9 in Norway, 4.9 in Sweden, 6.5 in Finland, and 9.9 in Denmark. Because of their lower alcohol consumption and restrictive alcohol policies, the other countries are often called “dry” alcohol cultures.²

As in the opening quote, the differences are often explained by the fact that Danes are simply so “conscious” in their drinking that no alcohol problems arise. “Conscious” implies that Danes are responsible and aware in their drinking—but also tolerant and understanding toward others’ drinking. One example is the development of the stereotype “roligans,” a pun on the word “hooligans” (*rolig* means “quiet” in Danish)—i.e., friendly, definitely non-violent “drunken Danes” having a good time with their Danish flags—and beers—at soccer matches.

The concept of “the conscious drinking style” has become a cornerstone of Danish liberal alcohol policy. Even in Danish alcohol research this drinking style has been characterized as the “Danish alcohol consumers’ consciousness,” *Danskernes alkohol forbrugerbevidsthed*.³ In a Danish context the concept “consciousness,” *bevidsthed*, is ambiguous. In “the history of mentalities” the concept stands for what people *think* about alcohol in general, but it can also be interpreted to mean that the Danes are *aware* of their alcohol use.

Two questions—“How do people manage a liberal alcohol policy?” and “Is it necessary to impose a restrictive alcohol policy with all its complications if people can manage?”—have become implicit objects for research in the “wet” Danish alcohol culture.⁴ Why force a “dry,” tedious alcohol culture when a “wet,” pleasant and non-problematic alcohol culture is possible?

In this article I shall not try to estimate the exact consequences of the “wet” alcohol culture, nor try to decide whether the Danish alcohol consumption is problematic or not. But we must acknowledge that the concept of consciousness is responsible not only for the liberal alcohol policy and the high alcohol consumption, but also for its resulting physical diseases.⁵ As shown by Thorkil Thorsen, there is in Denmark a direct long-term correlation between the risks for diseases from alcohol and the total alcohol consumption.⁶

We must also acknowledge that the stereotype of the happy, non-violent Danish beer-drinking *roligan* makes the Danes behave better in drinking situations to live up to the stereotype and to prove they are real Danes. And the Danish lack of social rejection of those who drink in itself makes the social problems caused by alcohol less serious—until the physical effects cannot be ignored any longer, by which time they have become hard to cure. Also, the Danish pattern of “frequent but temperate” alcohol consumption among

ordinary people creates fewer acute alcohol crises caused by intoxication—e.g., during weekends.

The above discussion poses two different questions:

1. If there is no discrepancy between the concept of consciousness and reality, if the Danes really are at the same time more tolerant and more responsible in their drinking, and if their drinking habits therefore create fewer problems, then we must ask: Why did Denmark, alone among the Nordic countries, develop such an attractive culture?
2. If there is a discrepancy between the concept of consciousness and reality, then the concept of “the conscious Danish drinking style” reflects a situation where the discourse, the way you talk about alcohol, does not fit the hard facts about alcohol and even tends to make them invisible. We must therefore pose a new question: From where does the concept of the Danish consumers’ consciousness toward alcohol derive? How could such an illusion develop?

To answer these questions we must try to discover how and when the Danish drinking style began to differ from that of the other Scandinavian countries and—even more important—how and when the concept of “the conscious drinking style” was introduced.

When did Denmark begin to differ?

The differences in attitudes toward alcohol among the Scandinavian countries can be dated back at least to the late 19th century, as seen the fact that the temperance movement never became as strong—or as consistent—in Denmark as in the other Scandinavian countries.

In an earlier paper⁷ I tried to explain this in terms of ideology and to identify differences in alcohol culture between Sweden and Denmark in the second part of the 19th century. I saw the religious differences as crucial in explaining why a temperate ideology emerged in Sweden and not in Denmark. In Sweden there was a connection between the Anglo-American revivalist ideology and temperance ideals: step by step, people should work to make themselves better and obtain salvation. Temperance was a part of that salvation project. The Danish Revivalist Movement—especially its liberal Grundtvigian branch—was influenced by German Lutheran tradition. Grundtvig himself was a minister and poet who became a trendsetter in the 19th-century Danish peasant culture. According to him, an individual could do nothing to achieve salvation; faith was not a human accomplishment, but something given to the individual. This faith brought such a peaceful state of mind that the individual imperceptibly changed for the better, and this showed itself in daily life. It was only via the internal change that followed renewed faith that the individual could achieve genuine liberation from his or her vices. To attempt to better oneself via concrete action showed a lack of faith, and it could easily lead to self-righteousness. Therefore the temperance culture was self-righteous and unnecessary in a Danish context. This does not mean that the Danish revivalist movements were drinking movements, just that they were movements that did not ban the use of alcohol. The paper tried to isolate the impact of a single factor: the ideologies of the revivalist movements.

In this article I shall try to show that the revivalist movements can be seen as a factor that made possible a “wet” alcohol culture in Denmark. But we still need to answer this question: Which factors in society actively promoted a liberal drinking culture?

Today one of the main differences between Denmark and the other Scandinavian countries is that beer drinking plays an

important role in the modern Danish liberal drinking style. Figure 1 shows that it is in fact beer that is responsible for the higher Danish level of alcohol consumption.

An obvious suggestion would be that the "*Danish liberal but conscious alcohol culture*" is connected to the development of a Danish beer-drinking tradition.

In the 19th century, when it first became possible to measure such things, statistics of alcohol consumption measured in 100% alcohol showed that the main intoxicating beverage in Denmark, as in the other Scandinavian countries, was distilled spirits. Spirits consumption apparently peaked around the middle of the 19th century.⁸

The Danish statistician Anders Milhøj sees a decline in the consumption of distilled spirits in the 1870s and 1880s. But the supposed decline may in fact be due to underreporting because of less efficient taxation. Toward 1887 the production process had become much more effective, and therefore the same amount of taxed production meant a much larger volume of spirits.⁹

After the imposition of a volume-based tax on spirits in 1887 and on beer in 1892, alcohol statistics became much more reliable.¹⁰

It has often been alleged that the excise tax on distilled spirits in 1917, caused by the shortage of grain and the fiscal needs during World War I, was unintended and in the long run became the determining factor behind the Danish beer-drinking style.¹¹ At first glance this seems probable. Consumption of distilled spirits fell dramatically after 1917—without the use of prohibition at the national level.

But I wonder if the changes in the Danish drinking style can be explained by the high tax alone. Cultures certainly do not change from one day to the next. After all, what made the tax

FIGURE 1
Alcohol consumption 100% per capita in the Scandinavian countries in 1979
Liter 100% per inh.

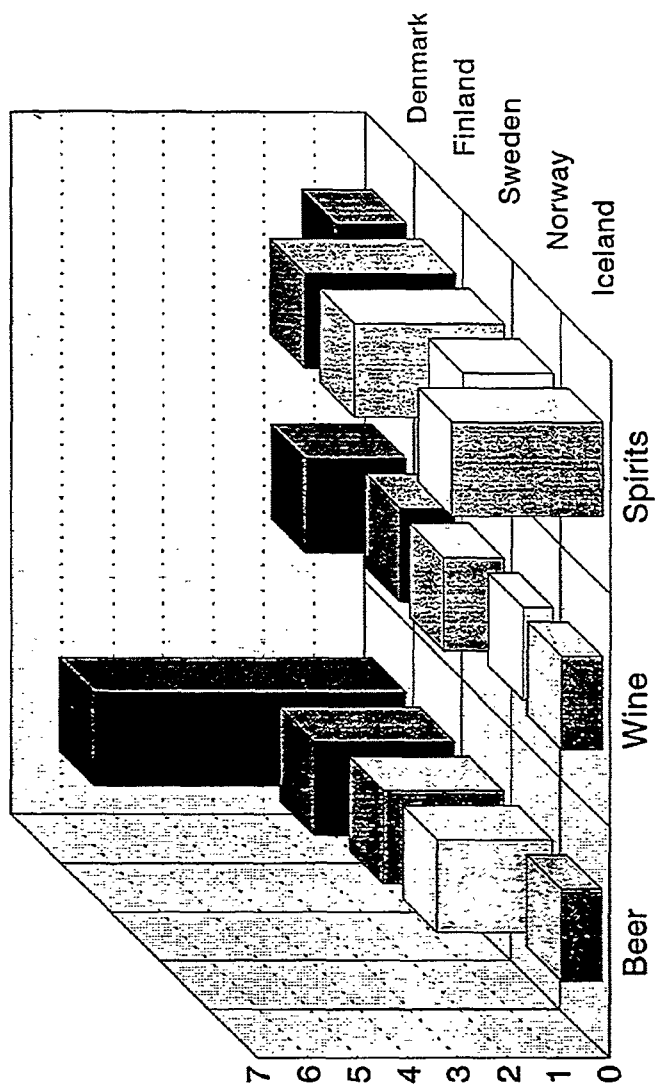
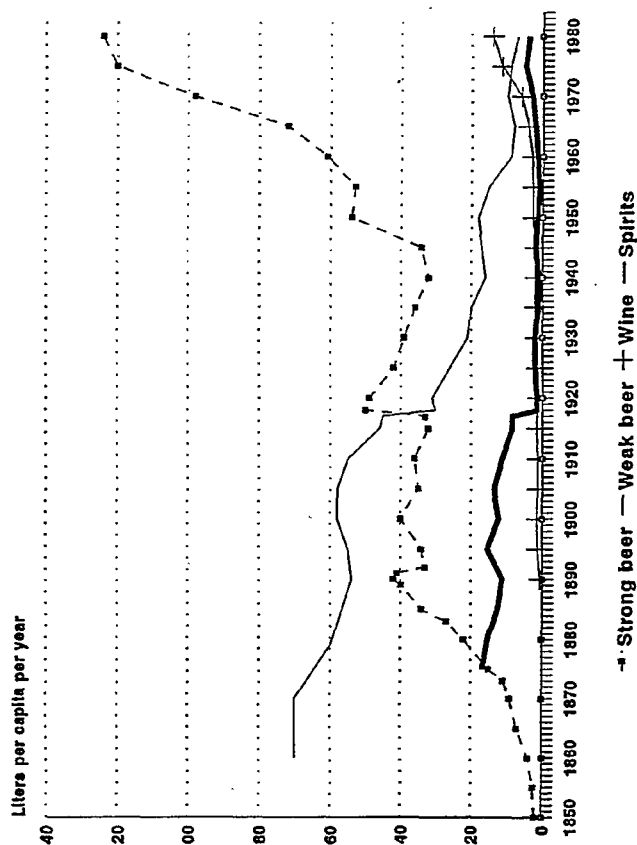


FIGURE 2
Alcohol consumption in Denmark 1850-1990 in 100% alcohol. The graph shows the decline in alcohol consumption in 1917, when the Danish government imposed a very high excise duty on distilled spirits. In the long run beer has reached the former leading position of distilled spirits.



Bildesl. Erikson, 1992

possible? And why just a tax on distilled spirits and not on beer, which certainly also used grain in the production process? If the reason was the shortage of grain and the fiscal needs, one might have expected a similar tax on beer. And if the tax was imposed for economic reasons, then the yield was disappointing, because it caused a remarkable decline in consumption of distilled spirits.¹² As for the grain shortage, it was less serious than it seemed, because both the distillers and the brewers had arranged their own import of grain alongside the state-regulated imports. It was even said that the tax led to Danish agriculture losing valuable waste products from the distillation process!¹³

What do we really know about the Danish beer-drinking tradition before 1917? Can a long beer tradition explain why distilled spirits were so heavily taxed in 1917, while beer escaped?

Bottom-fermented beer

According to Danish history books, Danes have always drunk a lot, and since far back in history Denmark has had a vivid beer-drinking inn culture as an important—and natural—part of Danish life. Beer was even a normal part of traditional Danish nutrition.¹⁴ But this is a truth with modifications.

It is difficult to determine the amount and strength of the beer consumed before the beer tax in 1892. But no doubt the reason for imposing the tax was that a new type of beer—a stronger bottom-fermented lager beer—had been introduced into Denmark in the second half of the 19th century.¹⁵ Traditional Danish beer drinking was based on weak top-fermented beer. In the parliamentary debate in 1891 on the beer tax, the liberal Lars Larsen distinguished clearly between “the new beer” and the *hvidtøl* (household beer) brewed mainly at home or in the old breweries.¹⁶

Of course, the traditional top-fermented household beer could also be quite strong. In his history of the Danish brewing industry, Kristof Glamann concluded that the old top-fermented beer was not always of a weak household kind; top-fermented beer *could* contain a high proportion of alcohol.¹⁷ But strong beer was certainly not what people usually drank.

Its quality and strength clearly made bottom-fermented beer an enormous success—it was something new and attractive. And according to the production statistics of the Copenhagen brewing industries, J. C. Jacobsen of Carlsberg (the Brewer), who introduced bottom-fermented beer, *undergæret Bayersk øl*, into Denmark in 1847, maintained his leading position, followed by his son Carl Jacobsen and the Tuborg brewery.¹⁸

In 1891—just before the first beer taxation—the consumption of bottom-fermented beer increased very quickly and alarmingly.¹⁹ The new beer replaced the old top-fermented weak beer and became part of the daily life of the new urban working classes. In 1879 it even became a part of the workers' free food in the workplace.²⁰

The effect of this soon became obvious. In 1889 H. P. Ørum evaluated the situation on the basis of local medical reports. Drunkenness was concentrated mostly in Copenhagen and the larger towns in eastern Denmark. In places where drinking was on the increase, the new beer had canceled the positive effects of the decline in the consumption of distilled spirits.²¹

The great Danish statistician Marcus Rubin showed in 1884 how the workers in Copenhagen had become addicted to bottom-fermented beer. Marcus Rubin fastened on the costs of the beer: even if the workers were content with three pints of bottom-fermented beer every day and never touched distilled spirits, it would still cost them more than a pint of distilled spirits and a bottle of weak beer taken together as in earlier days. The spread of bottom-fermented beer made it

much easier, according to Marcus Rubin, to spend all one's income on drink.²²

Especially the temperance movement stressed the fact that the new beer was much stronger and much more dangerous. It meant that intoxicating beverages had entered into new drinking situations and had reached groups in the population who until then had known only the weak top-fermented beer. In 1893 the *Good Templar Journal* (*Nordisk Good Templar*) wrote: "Many who had never tasted alcohol when it was available only in the form of concentrated spirits have now through beer got used to drinking alcohol as a part of their daily nutrition. . . . Perhaps beer does not produce big drinkers, but it has made the alcohol habit much more popular than did distilled spirits."²³

The temperance people were very much concerned about the bad influence of the new-beer products. They saw clearly that the increased production—and consumption—of bottom-fermented beer made necessary a massive temperance effort in Denmark.

Brewer Jacobsen's temperance project

Jacobsen was also aware of the intoxicating effect of the new beer, though it did not impel him to stop production. As early as 1884, Jacobsen, in an ideological lecture in *Videnskabernes Selskab* (the Royal Academy of Science), was convinced that the intoxicating effect of *his* beer could never cause alcoholism:

It is a fact that bottom-fermented beer, *Bajersk Øl*, even where it is drunk to excess as in Bavaria, is not intoxicating, for there you never see drunks in the streets and alcoholism is also almost unknown. It seems to be sufficient proof that the often expressed fear that bottom-fermented beer should cause alcoholism is in fact groundless. People seem to forget the medical experience that a beverage is as poison when concentrated, but harmless when it is consumed in diluted form.

The question is whether the alcohol in bottom-fermented beer is sufficiently diluted. The answer from Bavaria is that the current alcohol strength of 4% does not cause alcoholism. It has been said that bottom-fermented beer is stronger in alcohol content than necessary, and that it would be desirable to have a weaker brew. But please note that the Austrian "Society Against Drunkenness" has proved statistically that the consumption of distilled spirits, which had been decreasing in the Austrian countries where bottom-fermented dark beer became common, began to increase when the underclass reluctantly began to drink the low-priced and weaker "Abzugbier" with less than 3% alcohol—and the reason they did this was that the new beer tax raised the price so much that many could not afford the better dark beer, *Lagerøl*.

But by producing the bottom-fermented beer, he could accomplish what he saw as his most important mission: the wiping out of distilled spirits.

It is a fact that production of dark beer has found the right alcohol strength, at least for the working classes. The bottom-fermented beer must have an alcohol strength of 4% in order to accomplish its most important mission, viz., to supersede distilled spirits.

To reach that goal, bottom-fermented beer must be produced so cheaply that it will become the daily beverage for all people. We have had the pleasant experience here in Denmark that the cheap price to a considerable extent has increased such consumption, especially in the countryside, whereas earlier it was too limited to counteract distilled spirits.²⁴

The big challenge to the brewing industry and the brewers was to "save the Danes" from distilled spirits. For Jacobsen's "temperance" project it was therefore important to produce beer as well and as inexpensively as possible, and in going through with this project the brewers needed cooperation from Parliament!

It is definitely possible to explain the decline of distilled spirits after 1880 as a result of the success of the new intoxicating bottom-fermented beer, as Jacobsen had proposed in 1884. Together with Heyman of Tuborg, Jacobsen of Carlsberg wished to avoid a proposed beer tax. In a small

booklet Heyman argued that excessive beer drinking was much better than excessive drinking of distilled spirits.²⁵ But the brewers' good arguments did not prevent the new beer tax in 1892.

The attempts to market beer as a healthful substitute for distilled spirits were received with extreme skepticism by the temperance movement. They were particularly worried by Jacobsen's lecture of 1884, feeling that their goal—to create a better and more sober society—was highly threatened.²⁶ According to the temperance movement, bottom-fermented beer in the late 19th century seems to have been not only a substitute for, but also a supplement to, distilled spirits. Then too, the temperance people were fully aware of the commercial interests behind the brewers' "temperance" project.²⁷ They therefore picked Jacobsen of Carlsberg as their prime target in the fight against alcohol: "The Brewer is no fool. He knows what he is doing. If only he could make people believe that bottom-fermented beer was healthful and nourishing, and distilled spirits worthless and dangerous, then it would be OK!"²⁸ According to the temperance movement, Jacobsen's project was alarming because the population believed in—or could easily be made to believe in—his good intentions:

For many years we in Denmark believed there was no real policy but that of the National Liberals. In the same way people imagined there was just one genuine beer. . . . The Brewer rubs his hands. For every draught beer he sends out over the country he gets a note back. The golden grain in the field is transformed into an intoxicating beverage, which weakens instead of strengthening. . . . And the beer stream which floats out from Carlsberg runs together with a stream of Gold, which floats into his cash box.²⁹

In the following decades the bottom-fermented beer was still marketed as a new national drink that could save the Danes from the bad consequences of alcohol. The variations on this theme were countless.

When J. C. Jacobsen died, in 1887, the leading temperance magazine wrote: "By constantly confirming and promoting the reputation of bottom-fermented beer, *Bajerskøllet*, he was responsible for its fateful influence on the people."

The temperance magazine urged everyone to fight against the Brewer's "life work." But it added thoughtfully that they would have wished that the Brewer's intelligence and remarkable business sense had been used for other, less harmful purposes.³⁰

In fact, the temperance movement and Jacobsen were related in more than one way. Both were created by the same social trend: the process of modernization and the building of the new mass society. Thus Jacobsen's "improvements" of the Danish drinking habits—and of the Danes—were possible only because of his new and good *scientific discoveries*, as shown by a Carlsberg representative, Dr. Max Henius, in a lecture in 1913 to a group of American brewers:³¹

The guiding principle upon which the brewery is to be conducted, and which is to be kept constantly in view, regardless of immediate profit, is the development of beer manufacturing to the greatest possible perfection, in order that this brewery and its product may always be worthy of being looked upon as models, thus contributing toward keeping the brewing of beer in this country on a high and honorable level.

Jacobsen also shared the same *values* as the temperance people. He was ascetic in his own life, and he believed it was possible for the individual to succeed through his own efforts, thus benefiting both himself and his country. In addition, he was a liberal and a patriot who dedicated his beer to the Royal Danish Court.

And finally, Jacobsen's Carlsberg used the same *concepts* as the temperance movement. He was able to combine concepts such as the people (*folk*), Danishness, culture, education, knowledge, liberty and democracy in his temperance project.

These concepts Jacobsen—like the temperance people—had borrowed from the the Grundtvigians, who around the turn of the century had a quasi-monopoly on the right to define the culture of the Danish people. By using these concepts, Jacobsen made his *beer project* a part of the common project of the Danish people in creating the new good society. When he died, in honor of the Danish people he bequeathed his brewery to the “Carlsberg Foundation” for the promotion of art, literature, and historical and scientific research. Through their drinking the Danes were made to support elite culture and the arts and sciences.³²

The temperance movement strategically tried to relate the temperance question to the farmers’ liberal opposition in Parliament, which was strongly influenced by the farmers’ politically and religiously liberal Grundtvigian movement. According to the temperance people, alcohol was a burden imposed by the upper classes to suppress the democratic opposition.³³ Therefore the “really free” people—i.e., the Grundtvigian farmers—should choose something other than the new Carlsberg beer:

We liberals ought to be sober when we drink beer. There are other breweries in this country than Carlsberg. . . . There are weaker beers than the alcoholic ones. We do not ruin anybody by depriving our adversary of our support. All we do is stop contributing to our own ruin. . . . No more Carlsberg!³⁴

The result in fact was that the Danish liberal Grundtvigian farmers, in the 1889/90 parliamentary debate on the first beer tax, supported the brewer—not the temperance people—and invoked liberty and democracy in their arguments *against* the beer tax. Such a tax would be a new burden imposed on the free and democratic farmers by the Conservative landowners and their regime. But the liberal farmers were also trying to escape control by the authorities as to where and how beer was consumed. It would amount to virtually a political action if the Conservative government were forced to use its “blue gendarmes” not only to suppress the peasants politically, but

also to suppress and control their beer drinking.³⁵ The coalition of brewers and liberals failed to prevent the beer tax in 1892, but a foundation had been laid for later success.

The Carlsberg representative, Dr. Max Henius, saw the brewing industry as having a leading role in raising cultural standards in Denmark:

I . . . intend to show you that there is good reason for being proud of that country and its achievements in the brewing trade, in art, in science, and in the promotion of temperance.

The accentuation of the "promotion of temperance" was a strategic manifestation. The Carlsberg representative once again stressed that Denmark had—always—been a liberal beer-drinking country:

You know that, according to the latest theories, the cradle of the great Teutonic race, embracing today most of the great nations of the world, Germany, Austria, England, and the United States, with the Scandinavian countries, the Netherlands, and Switzerland thrown in, and a liberal sprinkling elsewhere, stood along the shores of the Baltic and German oceans, that is, in what is today Denmark and adjoining coasts, and since beer was the favorite drink, when this race first appeared in history—and the myths and legends carry its use beyond the limits of history—perhaps beer also originated in the same regions.

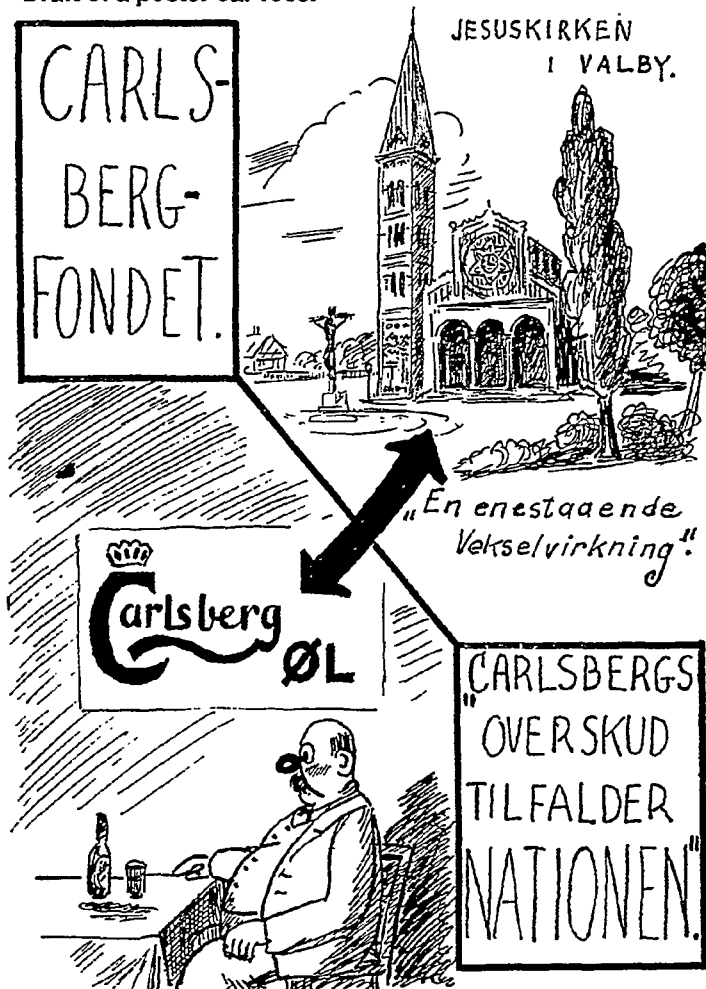
Beer was a part of being Danish, whereas distilled spirits were something novel as well as being un-Danish. By making good beer, Carlsberg revitalized ancient Danish culture:

You see, then, there is a certain historical or sociological interest attaching to Danish beer. And of late years the sociological interest has once more become prominent, though in a very different way, due to a beverage the ancients did not know—distilled spirits. During the early half of the last century the Danes were great drinkers of spirits. . . .

In 1915 the brewing industry even received support from a social movement called *Den personlige friheds Værn* (The Defenders of Individual Freedom), which opposed

FIGURE 3

"The surplus of the Carlsberg Foundation goes to the nation. The Jesus Church in Valby [and one of Brewer Jacobsen's customers]. A unique interaction." It was not least the Carlsberg Foundation's engagement in the building of museums and churches that caused offense. Draft of a poster ca. 1930.



temperance efforts at the local level and was supported by a suspiciously well-organized and well-informed “independent” secretariat in Copenhagen.³⁶ Incidentally (or perhaps not), The Defenders of Individual Freedom were backed by leading Grundtvigians, who hoped thereby to be able to suppress what they called the baneful Anglo-American influence on Danish culture.³⁷

The leader of The Defenders of Individual Freedom from 1924 onwards, Sven Røgin, was a statistician, and he became one of the most important authorities in the Danish debate on alcohol policy and taxation.

The Defenders of Individual Freedom even had a journal: *Sund Sans: Tidsskrift Mod Tvangsstyre: For personlig Frihed*, which could be translated as the ambiguous name “Healthy [or Common] Sense: Journal Against Coercive Rule: For Individual Freedom.”

The movement—and its employees—was also interested in history. Aage Welblund and A. G. Hassø, who were funded by The Defenders of Individual Freedom, wrote much on the Danish tradition of roadside inns. They developed the idea of the traditional beer-drinking Danish inn culture, arguing that even in medieval times inns were widespread throughout the country; as early as 1522, King Christian II ordered a network of inns to be built along Danish roads. Inns had for centuries been a natural part of Danish culture, and to threaten the inns would be to threaten Danish national identity. This of course served to legitimize the spread of inns at the time.³⁸ History thus played its part in the creation of the “wet” alcohol discourse.

Inventing an ancient Danish beer tradition was an important factor in the rise and legitimation of the modern beer-drinking style, which, however, ignored the fact that the character of the beer product had changed.

Danish temperance people as beer consumers!

The temperance movement's critical attitude to the rise of bottom-fermented beer was, together with the government's fiscal needs, the decisive factor behind the first beer tax, in 1892. The tax was followed by a 20% decline in the consumption of bottom-fermented beer.

But from the very beginning of the temperance movement it had proved difficult to define exactly what temperance people could or could not drink. Of course in Danish thinking no one could prohibit the consumption of "nonintoxicating" top-fermented beer. But how much alcohol did it take to make a beer "intoxicating?"—that was the question. Therefore a sizable part of the temperance movement decided that the new tax boundary on beer—i.e., 2¼% (by weight)—would be a simple fixed limit that would allow them on nutritional grounds to go on drinking the ordinary weaker sorts of top-fermented beer below 2¼%, from which you could not become intoxicated.

The 1892 beer tax caused a split in the temperance movement. A clear majority of the Danish temperance movement, especially the *Danmarks Afholdsforening* (Danish Temperance Society), followed the new tax boundary. But the International Order of Good Templars (I.O.G.T.), was divided on the question. The beer tax therefore resulted in the founding in 1892 of a new Order of Good Templars, Nordic Independent Order of Good Templars (N.I.O.G.T.), which allowed its members to drink the weak beer. In fact, they drank a lot of it, deciding that if you were *allowed* to drink the stuff, then you *ought* to drink it. Due to its acceptance of beer, N.I.O.G.T. was thrown out of the International Order of Good Templars.

It was not, however, unproblematic to modify the temperance pledge, and the situation was much discussed among temper-

ance people.³⁹ The brewers also exploited the situation. Gradually Carlsberg succeeded in producing bottom-fermented pilsner beer, which had less than 2 1/4% alcohol and was thus within the modified boundaries of the temperance pledge.

In this way Carlsberg and the other breweries found a growing and prospering market among the temperance people—and they were very proud of it:

Strange to say—at least strange to us who are accustomed to the fanatical anti-drink movement in this country—these low-alcohol beers are not generally opposed by the temperance people of the country. On the contrary, they frequently use them and allow them to be sold in the “temperance houses” or [temperance] “inns” where people gather for social entertainment.

In 1913 Carlsberg could conclude that this type of beer was now the most popular in Denmark. Step by step, Carlsberg had succeeded in making temperance people part of the old Danish tradition of beer drinking.⁴⁰

But now the Carlsberg brewers changed the argument. They distanced themselves from the old type of top-fermented beer, which they now described as being as strong and as dangerous as distilled spirits.

There was some beer brewed, but it did not amount to much. It was a top-fermented kind, similar to English porter, rather heavy in alcohol, but the common drink of the people was “snaps.”

The modern Danish lager beers are much lighter in alcohol than the older top-fermented kind and have crowded the latter to the wall.

The Carlsberg brewers seemed now to reach the opposite conclusion from that reached in 1884, when Jacobsen claimed that the old top-fermented beer was *weak* and that it was necessary to make a *stronger*, 4% beer to oust the distilled spirits. Now all of a sudden the Danes should drink the new *weak* bottom-fermented beer to oust the old *strong* top-fermented beer!

As late as 1913 the bottom-fermented beer as such did not have the role to which—according to Carlsberg—its temperance qualities entitled it. People still drank large quantities of spirits! So Carlsberg intensified their long-standing campaign to have distilled spirits taxed instead of beer:

If beer is the best antidote for strong drink, and the tax-free beers are so popular, why, you would ask, has the consumption of spirits not diminished more substantially, and why has not beer consumption increased more? The answer is that the system of taxation in force has given ardent spirits an artificial support and to that extent has hampered the progress of temperance.

And in their argumentation to avoid a new general beer tax, Carlsberg exploited the paradox that the majority of the Danish temperance movement supported the weak bottom-fermented beer:

It is interesting to note that the manufacture of low-alcohol, tax-free beers has to a considerable degree been looked upon favorably by temperance workers. The leaders of the movement realized that in the fight against intemperance in the use of alcoholic beverages, it was of great importance to get a beverage that could take the place of the strong drinks. For that reason many temperance people were friendly toward the efforts to manufacture a type of beer that was at once palatable and contained but little alcohol.

For Carlsberg's "temperance project," the most promising development was that Danes drank their beer in a civilized manner in temperance hotels. According to Edwin A. Pratt, in his "Licensing and Temperance in Sweden, Norway and Denmark," Carlsberg called the new Danish controlled and civilized drinking style the "Copenhagen system," describing it as an equivalent to the well-known Swedish Gothenburg system, *Göteborgssystemet*, which was based on the elimination of profit in the alcohol trade:⁴¹

The Copenhagen system, as organized by the temperance societies of the city, is based primarily upon that principle of recognizing light beers as temperance drinks, but it goes much further than that. It recognizes also the social instincts of our common humanity.

The Gothenburg system did not recognize "the social instincts of our common humanity," and this, according to Carlsberg and the civilized Danes, was its main failure:

The failure to do this constitutes one of the weakest features in the Gothenburg system, especially as enforced in Norway. The Bolag and Samlag drinking bars are avowedly simply places where men can go to satisfy the purely physical sensation of thirst. With the sole exception of the money payment, they perform just the same role for their patrons that the water trough in the street does for horses and cattle. Men come in, get their drink, swallow it off, and are then expected to go their way, just as the horses and the cattle move on from the trough as soon as they have had their fill. In Norway there is even a great reluctance to provide seats, lest the men be tempted to stay and talk to one another, and in both countries the hours of closing are abnormally early.

The Copenhagen system provided at the same time a more enjoyable, civilized and healthful beer-drinking culture in temperance homes:

Unlike the Gothenburg system, the Copenhagen system sees in human beings something more than purely physical or animal wants, and it aims at providing establishments where a maximum of possible social enjoyment can be obtained, with the help not merely of aerated waters, but also of light (weak) beers of the kind already described. Hence the establishments known by a name that literally translated means "Abstinence Homes." . . . So far has the movement spread that, although it was started only recently, there is now an *Afholdshjem* or "Temperance Home" on the lines here indicated in a large number of towns throughout Denmark. . . . The bottles you find on the tables are the tax-free beer with less than 2¼% alcohol. The sign under the clock states that the inn closes at 12 o'clock, while the other one, in the rear, contains the legend "No strong drinks sold here."

The weaker bottom-fermented beer was, in other words, Carlsberg's and the Danish people's common solution to alcohol problems.

There is no doubt that Carlsberg was able to make the Danes believe that they alone understood the use of alcohol—specifically, their bottom-fermented beer—in a pleasant and

problem-free way. Thus Carlsberg succeeded in creating the concept of the "Danish consumers' consciousness."

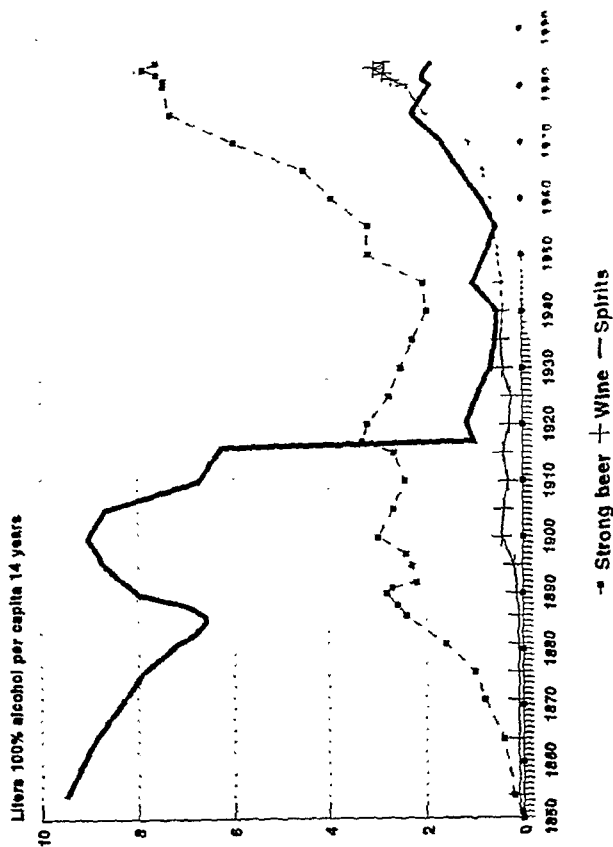
The 1917 tax on distilled spirits was in a remarkable way in line with Carlsberg's original idea of keeping beer cheap and thus attractive for the Danish population. It showed how successful the brewers had been in promoting beer as "healthful," and not only in Danish public opinion, but also in political inner circles! The 1917 debate in the journal *Sund sans* also proved that temperance and prohibition sentiments were being taken seriously—at least by the brewers.⁴² For example, the argument about the wartime shortage of grain for nourishment and thus the need to prohibit brewing and distilling was, in the case of beer, efficiently opposed by S. P. L. Sørensen from the Carlsberg laboratory. He argued in 1917, in *Sund sans*, that beer had nutritional value. Eating hulled grain yielded only 60% of its nutritive value, in comparison with 83%–88% for beer. In another comparison, coffee—and spirits—had no nutritive value. And if you produced meat, you made use of only 15%.⁴³

Was the 1917 tax based on an unholy alliance between the brewing industry and the temperance movement? Especially the beer-drinking part of the movement supported the tax on distilled spirits as a main instrument to reduce alcohol consumption in society.

No doubt the heavy taxation on distilled spirits in 1917 made beer much more attractive in price. People now drank more beer than they had spirits, but as beer was that much weaker, total alcohol consumption went down.

The tax on distilled spirits, together with "Temperance Homes" and local prohibition measures, which allowed that only the tax-free weak beer be sold,⁴⁴ created a "dry" generation with a careful and conscious beer-drinking style. The "dry" period ended with the "dry" generation—that is, in the 1930s and 1940s. The consumption of the stronger bottom-

FIGURE 4
Consumption of alcoholic beverages in liters: weak beer below 2 1/2% [weight], bottom-fermented beer, wine and spirits. In the long run it was not the weak beer, but beer as such which became popular. The graph shows how the weaker top-fermented beer was replaced by the stronger bottom-fermented beer as the main intoxicating beverage in Denmark.

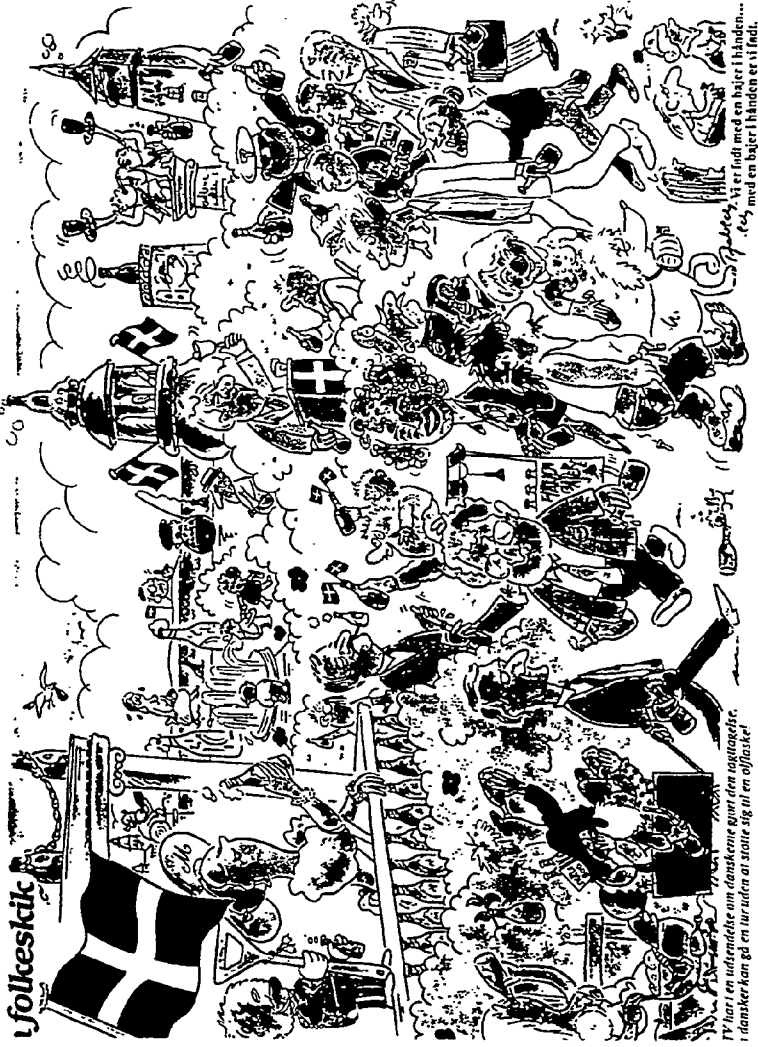


fermented beer increased dramatically in the decades after World War II. My contention is that this sequence of events happened just because of the introduction of the new tradition of the “harmless” and “conscious” drinking style of bottom-fermented beer.

Are the Danes as conscious as they believe they are? We still do not know. A preliminary conclusion must be that the brewing industry in Denmark gained from the creation of concepts such as “harmlessness” and “consciousness” and from the “liberal Danish drinking discourse,” which allowed a liberal and “wet” Danish beer-drinking style.

I have not tried to offer an answer to the question of whether the Danes practice a conscious drinking style or not. All I have done is to argue that the construction of the concept is not necessarily a product of the actual drinking style, but reflects a specific historical configuration.

FIGURE 5
A folk custom



We are born with a beer in the hand.
With a beer in the hand we are born.

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